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SUBJECT: Iran Student's Day Protest Feedback

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: On Tuesday December 8th, CONOFF surveyed Iranian non-immigrant visa (NIV) applicants regarding the December 7th "Student's Day" protest in Iran. The protests were described as better organized and larger than the November 4th demonstrations. Reactions to the present political climate reflected mixed feelings of support for the protesters to hope for a return to calm. An overall uncomfortable feeling of tightened state security and surveillance pervaded all applicant responses. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (SBU) The most impassioned of the Iranian respondents was an architecture student whose brother participated in the December 7th Tehran University protest. According to her brother, Sunday night people chanted "God is Great" from their rooftops to defy Supreme Leader Khamenei. She said demonstrations took place at many universities including Tehran's Sharif Institute of Technology and in other cities such as Shiraz, Mashhad, and Kerman. On December 7th, Basij militiamen with batons reportedly deployed at Tehran University in advance of the protest, but students were present in such great numbers that they reportedly managed to force the Basij's out. When the Basijis tried to attack certain students, other students locked arms and came in between them. She added that security authorities targeted protest leaders who led anti-government chanting for arrests. She said that the protests were far better organized than the last demonstration on November 4th. Her father, a university professor, attributed this to the government's visible deployment of rooftop snipers to discourage participation during the November protests.

¶3. (SBU) The architecture student described the Basijis as paid government mercenaries with no fear of committing murder. She attributes their pro-government zeal to government payments as well as special treatment. For example, Basijis who choose to pursue higher education do not need to take regularly required university entrance exams. She added that because of this, "Khamenei is like a god to them."

¶4. (SBU) The architecture student had participated in previous demonstrations. She said that though leaderless, students were still hopeful of an evolution in their political system towards a true democracy. She explained that if the position of Supreme Leader were eliminated, Iran would become a true democracy. She added that students remain excited and are willing to sacrifice despite the level of danger. She repeatedly noted that "40 million" Iranians are against the current regime so eventually they must succeed. She cited the government's strong reaction to the protest as a sign of fear and that the students are "fearless." She was not aware of any future planned protests.

¶5. (SBU) Other applicant responses were far more low-key and moderate. One student from Sharif University said he was interested to hear about the protest from his friends but was apolitical himself. He explained that he was an academic and did not approve of the current climate of instability as it was detrimental to his studies. He hopes for a return to calm so he can focus on his coursework. A middle-aged Iranian woman noted that the public environment was not good since moderate to liberal Iranians feel as if someone is "watching over their shoulder." She noted that prior

to the election everyone wanted to believe that they had a real democracy, but that now the lie has become so obvious that most people cannot accept it. She thinks the best way forward is for the government to admit its mistakes so confidence can be restored. In the end she noted that a stable and safe environment for her children was all she hoped for. Another middle-aged Iranian woman responded, "What can I say, it's not good" and quickly walked away.

16. (SBU) COMMENT: Based on accounts from Iranians visa applicants, the current protest movement appears to be self-generated among student groups with no direct connection to Mir Hossein Mousavi or other public opposition leaders. As the architecture student noted "Mousavi is a good man but not a leader." The internet appears to be the primary source of protest information and communication. Despite her excitement the architecture student was unable to explain how the student movement would lead to meaningful change. Although yesterday's protest appears to be larger than last month's, none of the applicants was able to quantify its size. Most applicants, although unhappy about the elections and the resultant increased security situation, appear to err on the side of caution, moderation and hope simply for a return to pre-election stability and order. END COMMENT.

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